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Undergraduate Social Education Student's Perspectives about the Profession

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Abstract

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Higher education institutions, responsible for training social educators, should ensure the construction of a profile marked by their technical versatility and whose socio-educational intervention is directed at all people, regardless of their situations in life. Reflection on the construction of this profile is fundamental given the difficulties of identity that the profession faces. In this context, we sought to develop a study which would allow us to identify how the students of a degree course in Social Education characterise this professional, in order to reflect on the contribution of training provided by the institution concerned and, if necessary, make the adjustments arising from the results. This is a qualitative, exploratory study, using an unstructured questionnaire applied to a convenience sample of 140 Portuguese students of the three years of a degree course in Social Education. Its emerging categorical content analysis was performed using the NVivo software, version 11. The main results point to a broad vision of the profession and are not limited to the work geared to specific populations or issues, valuing the relevance of the professional in the field of non-assistance socio-educational intervention. The main area of overlap between training objectives and students' perceptions about practice allows the impact of training to be positively assessed, despite possible curricular adjustments resulting from further analysis, including the need to reinforce community intervention, undervalued by students, even though it plays a key role for social educators.

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Keywords: Social Education; Profession Learning; Student's Perceptions.



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1. Introduction

Social educators (SE) are specialists in the social field working with educational strategies in different contexts. They are simultaneously actors, educators and social mediators. This is a recent profession which is constantly growing (Domínguez & Blansh, 2013) and whose construct stems from structural and conjunctural elements (Solé, 2010). Nevertheless, they are faced with the paradox of the simultaneity between identity construction and rethinking the role and training of the social educator facing the challenges of a social situation in which poverty, marginalization, population aging, immigration, violence and delinquency prevail (Planella, 2006; Sainz & Gonzalez, 2008). In this sense, the proposition by Sáez (2005, 2007) points to the importance of situating the profession from the contributions of the actors in the intellectual (higher education institutions) and labour (professionals) fields, defining a consensual and contextualized view of the career and providing the theoretical, methodological and technical models, which allow us to reflect on professional work and practices.

We face a difficult task with many obstacles recognized in the literature. Torío- López (2006) points out difficulties in differentiating competencies, in defining the academic and professional profile and in distinguishing functions. Moreover, there is a wide range of areas and intervention contexts (Castillo & Bretones, 2013; Castillo & Cabrerizo, 2011). Indeed, there does not seem to be a unique way to understand the social education, but different conceptions according to different spaces and times (Díaz, 2006). In this sense, it is essential to analyse the difficulties faced by the profession in depth to define competencies, profiles and functions, compared to other professionals who compete for the same area of intervention (Losada-Puente, Muñoz-Cantero, & Espiñeira-Bellón, 2015). However, the literature is consensual in relation to structural aspects of the SE training profile, as a professional designed at the meeting point and intersection between the fields of social work and education, becoming autonomous from the first by the pedagogical character that determines their intervention models, and from education in general, including schooling, by the informal character (we prefer non-schooling) of intervention (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004). We are thus speaking of a professional with an educational purpose of empowering their subjects for social life, in the field of preventing and rehabilitating social and cultural problems (Azevedo, 2011; Cardoso, 2006; Carvalho & Baptista, 2004; Díaz, 2006; Ronda, 2012; Serrano, 2003). From this perspective, promoting the following is emphasized: i) learning/supporting the development of individuals' personal, family, social and professional potentialities and competencies, fostering autonomy, responsibility, understanding and involvement/participation in the social environment; ii) individuals' social and professional integration, valuing their participation in the group, the family and the community, in a process of constructing total citizenship; iii) improving the living conditions of individuals and their well-being.

With regard to the areas of intervention, while Carvalho and Baptista (2004) emphasize adult, specialized, workplace and occupational, community, prison, intercultural, environmental, for citizenship, health and free time education, other authors (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación [ANECA], 2005; Domínguez & Blansh, 2013) summarize them in three main paths: i) specialized education (promoting the social inclusion of individuals and population groups in situations of marginalization, maladjustment, conflict and social exclusion as well as preventing such situations in risk groups); ii) adult education (meeting the needs of the adult population related to their

personal development and their socio-occupational adaptation); iii) sociocultural activity (paying attention to socio-cultural needs and community development). The challenges faced in these areas cut across different population groups (childhood, adolescence and youth, adults, elderly people, families, people with disabilities, people with problems in terms of drug dependence and marginalized groups) in different contexts.

From this, competencies associated with the context of the profession stand out: knowledge of the target population and intervention contexts, as well as research, planning, intervention and assessment methodologies and techniques, that allow socio-educational projects to be constructed to satisfy the purpose of acting, consolidated by practice in an integrated curricular internship. Added to this are personal skills (Asociación Internacional de Educadores Sociales [AIEJI], 2005; Garcia Rojas, 2010; Rosa, Navarro-Segura, & López, 2014) which highlight empathy, respectfulness and solidarity with the subjects and institutions, together with the development of attitudes which facilitate work in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The goal is to promote the reconstruction of integrative skills of scientific and technical knowledge, as well as general and transferable skills in the subject-context interface (Fernandes et al., 2013).

Accreditation of the profession initiated in the human responsibility that is inherent to it, requires continuous professional and personal training in order to develop systematic, coherent, concerted work adapted to the current social reality. Moyano (2012), based on various undergraduate study plans in social education in higher education institutions in Spain, systematises the organisation of training in terms of: i) social problems (drug addiction, child and youth abuse, unemployment, violence...); ii) institutions where the functions are developed (social services, prisons, educational centres...); iii) population categories (children at risk, immigrants, the elderly...); iv) intervention levels (socio-occupational inclusion, child protection, disability, juvenile justice, drug abuse....). In Portugal, in a similar attempt at systematisation, Canastra (2011) highlights three training profiles: i) an SE with a pedagogical intervention addressing individuals at risk); ii) an SE as an education professional that favours institutional contexts of cultural, social and educational mediation as well as community intervention; iii) an SE at the confluence of the above profiles.

In a more superficial appreciation, we are confronted with a variety of classification systems that can be misleading as to the identity of these professionals. However, in our view, it is more apparent differences based on different categorical systems. Thus, the removal of welfare vision underpinning many other social professions (e.g. social worker) is consensual, because of the structural matrix afforded by social pedagogy. It is clear in the literature that the primary role of this science, insofar as it studies, analyses and proposes models of social education, is that it investigates practices and interprets the social, political and economic conditions which determine the development of the profession (Caride, 2005; Planella & Vilar, 2006; Serrano, 2003). Indeed, it is a practice fortified by a theoretical basis of unquestioning support, giving the social educator a solid professional identity. However, it can be redefined from a reflective attitude towards the profession, resulting from a collective effort of students, trainers, professionals and employers (Duta, Forés, & Novella, 2015).

2. Problem Statement

Higher education institutions are responsible for professional training in social education. The characteristics presented above, should enable a set of teaching and learning experiences for their students to emerge in order to define up a professional profile able to meet the challenges facing the area of social work today. The institution's social educator's training which was studied in this work has an underlying professional socio-educational intervention profile according to most current perspectives of social work and which naturally move away from more traditional perspectives characterised by welfare practices. However, will the students view their training in this manner? It was with the aim of identifying how the students of a degree course in social education portray the practice of these professionals that this study was developed.

3. Research questions

Taking into account the problem stated above and in order to assess the contribution of such training to the students' perspective of this professional, two study questions which we intend to answer emerge: What is the students' perspective on the professional profile of the social educator? Which lines of intervention of the social educator are identified by students?

4. Purpose of the study

From analysing the answers to the study questions, we intend to reflect on the contribution of education in defining a professional profile adjusted to the challenges faced today and which are more consistent with contemporary perspectives of social work. On the other hand, we will attempt to understand the changes in perspectives on the profession provide by learning over the three-year degree course, as well as indicators for any changes to be made in the training plan which will contribute to building a professional profile recommended by the institution, in order to improve the quality of learning.

5. Research methods

To achieve the research purpose, a qualitative and exploratory study was performed at a Portuguese polytechnic higher education institution in the centre of the country. This methodological choice is based on the fact that our aim is not to generalise the results but rather to understand and intervene in a specific situation. On the other hand, it allows us to obtain dense, descriptive information on the phenomenon under study. Its inductive analysis will allow us to understand the meaning constructed by students on the profile of social educators based on their training experience. It is thus intended to produce knowledge that will support eventual changes in teaching and learning practices in this degree programme.

5.1. Participants

The convenience sample, characterised in Table 1, included the participation of 140 Portuguese students of the three-year course in social education at a Portuguese polytechnic higher education

institution in the centre of the country. The students were aged between 18 and 44 years, with a mean age of 21.64 (± 4.91). Most of the participants were female (95.7%) from urban areas (67.1%). Students from all three years of the course took part, including 59 students from the 1st year, 49 from the 2nd and 32 from the 3rd.

Table 1. Characterization of the sample.

	n	%
Gender		
Female	134	4.3
Male	6	95.7
Year in the course		
1 st	59	42.1
2 nd	49	35
3 rd	32	22.9
Residence		
Urban	94	67.1
Suburban	7	5
Rural	39	27.9

5.2 Instrument

The students completed a non-structured questionnaire with questions concerning the students' perspectives on the profile of social educators and their practice in addition to a first section of sociodemographic characterization.

5.3 Procedure

The instrument was applied in the classroom context, ensuring full compliance with the rules of ethics involved in any research project. For this, the participants were informed about the aims of the project and voluntary participation with a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity of responses. They were also provided the necessary clarifications during application of the questionnaire. Data collection took place in June 2016 at the end of the school year in all of the classes of the three-year course simultaneously.

5.4. Data analysis techniques

Data analysis involved the use of emerging categorical content analysis performed with NVivo software, version 11.

6. Findings

After reading the answers to the questions, two dimensions emerged: i) lines of intervention and ii) the professional profile of the social educator.

The first dimension, referring to lines of intervention, involved two categories: i) personal and social development, including socio-educational work in prevention (with 29.7% of mentions in all the categories/subcategories found in the study); and ii) support for populations in social fragility/risk (22.7%). In turn, emerging subcategories were identified from the analysis of the students' responses. Under personal and social development (prevention), students mentioned in descending order of value,

this professional's activity: i) at a general level (16.2% of mentions in the entirety of the categories/subcategories); ii) under development of autonomy/coexistence (8.1%); iii) as regards promoting well-being (4.3%); and iv) social responsibility (1.1%). In the category on working with people/groups in social fragility/risk four subcategories were created: i) populations in social exclusion in general (13% of mentions, shown to be the most highly evidenced in this category); ii) people in poverty (3.8%); iii) minorities such as people with disabilities, ethnic groups, among others (3.2%); and iv) multi-challenged families (2.7%).

In the dimension related to the professional profile of the social educator, five categories were defined: i) specialist in social work for inclusion (26.5% of mentions in the total categories/emerging subcategories in the study, highlighted as the most relevant in this context); ii) mediator/professional of the relationship (9.7%); iii) change agent (5.4%); iv) member of a multidisciplinary team/network (3.8%); v) promoter of social projects (2.2%).

The percentages presented were calculated according to the total responses, frequency of 185, as well as the categories and emerging subcategories in the study. These results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' perspectives on the social educator's profile and practice.

Dimensions	Categories	Subcategories	Freq.	%
Lines of intervention	Personal and social development (prevention)	General	30	16.2
		Well-being	8	4.3
		Social responsibility	2	1.1
		Autonomy/Coexistence	15	8.1
		Category total	55	29.7
	Support for people in social fragility/risk	General	24	13
		Minorities	6	3.2
		Multi-challenged families	5	2.7
		People in poverty	7	3.8
		Category total	42	22.7
Professional profile of the social educator	Characteristics of the professional	Change agent	10	5.4
		Promoter of social projects	4	2.2
		Mediator/professional of the relationship	18	9.7
		Member of a multidisciplinary team/network	7	3.8
		Specialist in social work for inclusion	49	26.5
		Category total	88	47.6
			185	100

Analysis of the categories and subcategories by year of the course allowed us to point out differences in the perspectives of students throughout their training (Table 3). Thus, for the dimension, lines of intervention, the category personal and social development (prevention) was most often mentioned by 1st and 3rd year students (38.2% and 41.8%, respectively) being less relevant for 2nd year students (20%). In turn, the category of support for populations in social fragility/risk, within the same dimension, continued to be more highly valued by 1st year students (40.5%), with close percentages in the responses of 2nd and 3rd year students (30.9 % and 28.6%, respectively). In this dimension, for the category, personal and social development (prevention), 1st year students highlighted autonomy/coexistence (16.4%) and promoting well-being (10.9%); 2nd year students, general development (12.7%) and autonomy/coexistence (7.3%); and finally 3rd year students

highlighted personal and social development (prevention) in general terms (32.7%). On the other hand, for the category, support for people in social fragility/risk, the subcategory, general support, was the most widely mentioned by students in all three years, 30.9%, for 1st year students, 14.3% for 2nd year students and 11.9% for 3rd year students. We also emphasise that 1st year students report support for minorities (9.5%), the 2nd year students mention support for multi-challenged families (9.5%) and 3rd year students, intervention for people in poverty (9.5%), the latter being a constant across all internship contexts.

Table 3. Students' perspectives on the social educator's profile and practice by a year of the course.

Dimensions	Categories	Subcategories	1 st year		2 nd year		3rd year		Total	
			n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Lines of intervention	Personal and social development (prevention)	General	5	9.1	7	12.7	18	32.7	30	54.5
		Well-being	6	10.9	0	0	2	3.6	8	14.5
		Social responsibility	1	1.8	0	0	1	1.8	2	3.6
		Autonomy/Coexistence	9	16.4	4	7.3	2	3.6	15	27.3
		Category total	21	38.2	11	20	23	41.8	55	100
	Support for people in social fragility/risk	General	13	30.9	6	14.3	5	11.9	24	57.1
		Minorities	4	9.5	0	0	2	4.7	6	14.2
		Multi-challenged families	0	0	4	9.5	1	2.4	5	11.9
		People in poverty	0	0	3	7.1	4	9.5	7	16.7
		Category total	17	40.5	13	30.9	12	28.6	42	100
Professional profile of the social educator	Characteristics of the professional	Change agent	3	3.4	3	3.4	4	4.6	10	11.4
		Promoter of social projects	4	4.6	0	0	0	0	4	4.5
		Mediator/professional of the relationship	6	6.8	9	10.2	3	3.4	18	20.5
		Member a multidisciplinary team/network	0	0	0	0	7	7.9	7	8
		Specialist in social work for inclusion	26	29.5	11	12.5	12	13.6	49	55.7
		Category total	39	44.3	23	26.1	26	29.5	88	100

With regard to the professional profile of the social educator dimension and the characteristics of the professional category, the specialist in social work for inclusion subcategory emerged as the most relevant for students in all three years: 1st year (29.5 %), 2nd year (12.5%) and 3rd year (13.6%). In addition, the mediator/professional of the relationship subcategory was highlighted by the 2nd year (6.8%) and 3rd year students (10.2%). Being a member of a multidisciplinary team/network is only valued in the 3rd year (7.9%), perhaps because it stands out in the internship in this last year of the course.

7. Conclusions

From analysing the students' discourse in all of the years of the course, there seems to be a conceptualization of the social educator as a promoter of individuals' development from a preventive

approach. This brings us to a perspective of social education based on the purpose of educational and social action in promoting personal, social, professional and parental competencies (AIEJI, 2005). This finding would suggest that these trainees are able to become, as future social educators, key promoters of the human condition (Carvalho & Baptista, 2005). In this way, they go against a welfare dimension of the profession, showing a clear perception on the professional identity advocated in the training model under analysis. This result is all the more important as we know that professional identity is crucial in supporting the functions that the professional is able to exercise within the social work (Barbour & Lammers, 2015). Another line of intervention relates to supporting socially fragile populations, in general, including children, young people and elderly people and, where is possible to identify a variety of issues associated with risk experiences, maladaptation or deficits related to means of economic subsistence. This reading conveys the multidimensionality and scope of the social educator's work, not only relative to the target population, but also in the diversity of contexts in which they can exercise their activity.

Within the scope of lines of intervention, in close relationship with the data obtained on the professional profile, it is noted that students understand the profession as provided for in the national classification of occupations in (Instituto de Emprego e Formação Profissional [IEFP], 2010). Thus, it is up to the social educator to perform the (re)education, guidance, activity and management functions in a perspective of cooperation, as a mediator in the articulation between social teams, families and other community service institutions in supporting the construction of life projects and local and community development.

However, it is worth noting that students do not objectively assume the aspect relating to community development. We may conclude there is a need to strengthen this in terms of training (in particular at the theoretical/conceptual level). Indeed, somewhat paradoxically, the 3rd year students, when determining the professional profile, highlight the practice of networking in their internship (including with associations and local authorities), even though they do not mention this as a line of intervention (community orientation). It is essential that training can integrate a dialectic of knowledge and practices, promoting this specificity of socio-educational intervention in the discourse. We believe that the curricular reform made recently, following an external assessment by the National Accreditation Agency, responds to the need highlighted herein.

Regarding the profile shown in the records, we can see the confluence of two great guiding vectors that underlie the students' perspectives: i) the conception of educator as social technician who acts for inclusion, and ii) the idea of the educator as a professional social mediator of the relationship. Indeed, the first structural conceptual vector with regard to socio-educational work is that the educator acts for inclusion and should be able to outline the best responses to people's needs, enhancing their development for a full and inclusive participation (Ronda, 2012). It is a conception in line with the emergency standard of the SE in today's society, with the outbreak of this innovative scientific field being related to the phenomena of social exclusion and with its socio-political recognition. This, in turn, is associated to the fragile responses resulting from traditional welfare approaches (Carvalho & Baptista, 2005). The second vector associated with the conception of the educator as a social mediator

of the relationship leads us once again to the profile of competencies referred to by AIEJI (2005), which highlights relational and personal competencies as crucial in socio-educational work.

This notion of the social educator as a relationship professional involves working rigorously with the bonds that are established with children, youths or adults, specifically sensitivity in relation, interpretation, process and modification. Thus, relationship and communication competencies are considered the core of the profession (AIEJI, 2005; Garcia Rojas, 2010; Rosa, Navarro-Segura, & López, 2014). Nevertheless, the relational approach requires deep reflection on the part of social educators in the sense of being aware of their fundamental view of human beings, their norms and values (Carvalho & Baptista, 2004). Following this line of analysis, AIEJI (2005) states that the socio-educational work requires a “high level of empathy, conscience, ethical reflection and a sense of responsibility and a great deal of professional acumen” (p.18). Social and communication skills seem to underlie the value of the work in multidisciplinary teams and networks performed by the 3rd year students in their internship in the social context. In fact, much of the socio-educational work is conducted in collaboration with different experts in the context of interdisciplinary teams, which means having a command of the terminology used by other professionals, as well as a capacity to collaborate and develop partnerships with the members of the social support network and people who need their work, placing the social educator at the interface of different actors, institutions and social groups.

To sum up, we conclude that the results point to an effective recognition of the professional framework and appropriate professional content, as well as the skills required by the labour market (Fernandes et al., 2013), highlighting that the training provided contributes to the construction of a professional identity without ambiguity, and promotes favourable conditions for the profession’s sense of appropriation as internationally recommended (AIEJI, 2005; Caride, 2005; Planella & Vilar, 2006).

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